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Wilson Audio WATT/Puppy System 8 Loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

This is the big one. Even after decades, the Wilson Audio WATT/Puppy is the force to be reckoned with in high-end loudspeakers. Like the Quad Electrostatic, it's a benchmark by which all other speakers are judged. But, it's a moving target, as it keeps getting better and better. This latest – the \$24,950 System 8 – is the pinnacle of current Wilson thinking, combining trickle-down technology from the likes of the MAXX 2 and Alexandria loudspeakers, with built-up treatments from the stunning new Duette.

Although there are major changes to the speaker system, the external appearance of the System 8 is more or less identical to previous models. The WATT (Wilson Audio Tiny Tot) is an independent midrange and treble unit, which is designed to sit upon the Puppy sub-woofer. Years of symbiotic evolution has meant that the two devices are essentially intrinsically linked – if you wanted to use the WATT on its own as a near-field monitor (it's original task), there are better solutions in the Wilson portfolio today, and the WATT and Puppy are not really considered separately anymore.

To roll out that tired old cliché, this is evolution rather than revolution. But it's a pretty big evolution, up with opposable thumbs and growing a set of lungs. That said the bulk of the change occurs in the top box. The WATT gets a whole new tweeter and enclosure. The tweeter comes from the MAXX 2, and this has also necessitated using the technologies that go into the MAXX 2 crossover. The mid-range and bass units remain unchanged.

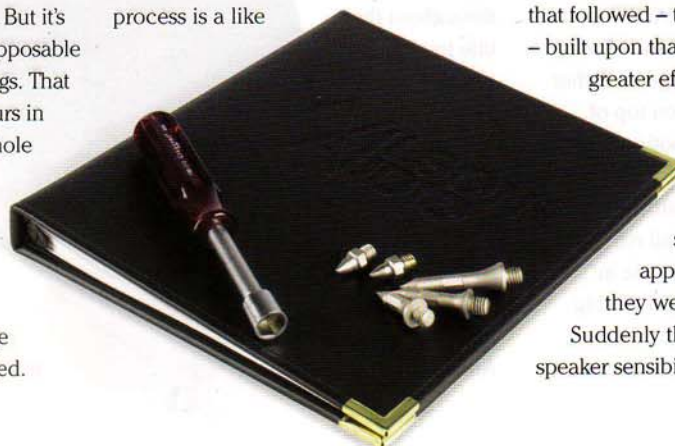
Less noticeable by eye alone are the materials changes to the cabinet. But try to pick up a System 7 WATT and a System 8 and you'll see where the difference goes. The System 8 cabinet is far lighter, as it replaces the mass loading with materials science: X material and M material, no less... Wilson Audio adopts the 1950's sci-fi B-movie school of nomenclature. These were first seen in the System 7 Puppy, with X material (which is mined from the atmosphere of the third moon of Vega 5) proving remarkably non-resonant and uncolored and M material (grown in giant vats by the Death Squirrels of Zeti Reticuli) being highly prized for its midrange clarity. Or something like that...

The System 8 comes in four standard colours, another eight regular optional colours and then any colour you can think of to special order. The WilsonGloss process is a like

the Dulux paint matching service in every DIY shop in the land, just far, far more rich and attractive. This should not be understated. It means you can make the speaker as outlandish or as subtly blending as possible. The bright blue and silver-grilled System 8 shown in the brochure definitely falls into the former category. If you want to make the speaker match the lemon yellow Lambo in your garage, no problems; if you want to make the speaker match your home décor, no problems.

It's bad journalistic form to use one product to focus on a review of another, but it's wholly appropriate here. The Wilson System 8 stands on the shoulders of giants; in this case the Duette and the System 7 that this speaker replaces. The System 7 was the big crossover speaker for me; this was the Wilson speaker (or at least, the first Wilson speaker that didn't cost six figures) that I didn't merely 'respect'. The System 7 was the Wilson speaker I actually liked. Others that followed – the MAXX 2, the Sophia 2 – built upon that 'like' to a lesser or greater effect.

Then came the Duette, and everything changed again. Suddenly, Wilson speakers sounded approachable, where before they were steely and aloof. Suddenly they had that small speaker sensibility that big speakers ▶



▶ often lack. Suddenly, the System 7 seemed a bit less integrated compared to its little brother. The System 7 had the dynamic edge and it certainly had range, reach and scale on the Duette, but there was a sense of musical belonging that the System 7 needed to have. And that's what the System 8 brings to the WATT/Puppy combination.



Let's put this into some kind of perspective. If this sounds like every iteration of WATT/Puppy prior to the System 8 was found wanting, guess again. Each successive WATT/Puppy sounds awesome; it's just somehow the Wilson wizards manage to slather on another layer of awe on top of each new model. The 'footie score' Wilsons (WATT 3/Puppy 2, Partick-thistle 3/Queen of the South 1 and so on) were remarkable detail retrievers, arguably achieving a pinnacle in System V. System 6 wrought the big change, bringing in enhanced coherence and making the speaker

less demanding of amplification (no more 'great speaker in search of an amp', more just 'great speaker') but with that came a harder speaker to place in a room with ease. Then, System 7 started bringing in still greater musicality and timing, smoothing out the bumps of the 6 in the process. System 8 sort of completes the circle, making this a more rounded speaker, still capable of great analysis of disc and system, but in a more fluid way, that brings it in line with the sort of entertainment opportunities afforded by the Duette. Given that the implication from Wilson Audio is that the developments in the System 8 come from the top down (specifically the MAXX 2), it seems strange that the System 8 seems to have so much sonically in common with the Duette, but perhaps this is not so odd, after all. They are all of the same family, after all.

Ben Harper's *Fight for Your Mind* shows what the System 8 is really capable of. It reveals that glorious mid-range; no longer larger than life or forward, but open and honest sounding. There are sounds that are harder to define on some systems, which come through clear here. For instance, in the back of the right channel throughout the title track is a percussion instrument. In most cases, it could be a tambourine, could be something African or South American,



could even be someone shaking milk bottle tops. Fact is, in the opening bars, it's too far back in the mix to be immediately recognisable. Except on the System 8. Here, it's immediately, instantly recognisable as sleigh bells. It could be nothing else... how could I be so stupid? Even when it's the only

instrument in the mix,

it's indistinct on most speakers compared to the sound of the Wilson.

Then, there's the timing. Usually, speakers like the Duette would out-time a WATT/Puppy design, by virtue of less drivers and less of a full-range presentation. That doesn't happen here, either. The loudspeaker is entirely neutral when it comes to timing, in that it doesn't impose or enforce a specific timing on the music, but neither does it slug the life out of the music. ▶



Compatibility...

One of the joys of the Wilson ethos – certainly when you think back to when the WATT/Puppy originally appeared – is amplifier compatibility. No amp-smashing load here, no one ohm impedance and 80dB efficiency; the later WATT/Puppy systems, in all their various guises, has been the amplifier-chummy speaker of the high end. Best of all, Wilson's importance in top-notch loudspeaking is so significant, that the vast majority of high-end speakers that have followed in the WATT/Puppy's wake have likewise been reasonably efficient affairs, usually with impedance traces that will never once turn an unsuspecting amplifier into a smoking ruin. This allowed us the choice of using valve amplifiers as well as transistors; if the high-end fraternity had followed the path of something like the Apogee, the valve amplifier would be almost extinct today.

This amplifier-friendliness is deceptive, however. Although, in theory at least, you could hook a £250 amplifier to a pair of £25,000 loudspeakers, it's not something that would be recommended. At the very least, you will end up with a horrific sound. The Duette may be remarkably good at working with amplification far below the norm for a five-figure loudspeaker, but the System 8 is fussier. As always, the System 8 will tell the reviewer exactly what's going on elsewhere in the audio chain (which is why the speaker system has been used by so many source and amp reviewers), and if you cut corners in the front end and amps, you'll notice that skimping time and time again.

It's hard to pick out a high-end combination with the Wilson system, because it is so ubiquitous. Peer into the test listening facilities of practically any American high-end electronics company and you will

find Wilson speakers, because they are such a reference point, just like you'll find a pair of Quad Electrostatics nestling somewhere in a loudspeaker design studio.

But, there are combinations that work together exceptionally well, one of which is Krell. Of course, now Krell has its own speaker range, this is one high-end company that doesn't sport Wilson in its listening room anymore (except by way of competition) but that is immaterial. The new Evolution series is the perfect counterpoint to Wilson, combining the speed and directness of small amplifiers with the sort of muscle needed to drive the speakers to usefully high SPLs. The system partnering the speakers for review featured an Evolution 505 SACD/CD player, connected to an Evolution 202 two-box pre-amplifier and then to an Evolution 402 stereo power amp, all linked using Krell's clever CAST current-domain transmission system – insert your own loudspeaker cable here. From experience, Cardas and Transparent would work well in this setting, while Nordost might make the sound too forthright in the top end.

These Krells, especially the amplification, give the headroom needed to play at balls-out levels and the sort of dynamic range that really shows off the System 8 at its best. But the speaker's comparatively easy-going specification means you aren't limited to amps with hundreds of watts on tap and playing with your electronics is an important facet of the evolving Wilson experience. Whilst power remains desirable its nature and how exactly it's delivered have become less so, making this a speaker to make the most of partnering electronics rather than one that demands a system built on its own terms.

► If something's upbeat, it will play it upbeat. If it's played down, it will play down. Compared to smaller speakers, it does appear to lack the sheer speed of delivery, but this is deceptive; the reality is that the Wilson can cope with the majesty of recordings where those little boxes tend to cut off the drama for speed (and price and box size). Play Eminem, fast, loud and angry and he retains all his vitriol and pace. But play Beethoven on a small two way and you lose a quarter of the string and percussion section, where here the sound is entirely intact.

What seems to have happened is that instead of sounding like a scaled-down Alexandria, the System 8 sounds like a Duette with added depth and dynamics. This is a thoroughly good thing, for two reasons. First... what a bass! Deep bass lines are taut, deep



and controlled, yet when played for droning effect on a disc, your eyes start to vibrate. Second, this small sound made big is just so much more musically integrated than before. Things just snap into focus all the more, music takes on that boppy, small box speaker sound, but with the added bonus of big speaker scale and energy. So, the speaker can cope with Rachmaninov-level dynamic range and damn-the-torpedos-full-speed-ahead

techno, without favouring one over the other. It's a win-win situation.

There's a dismissive attitude toward Wilson speakers in general, usually from those who have only limited exposure to the designs. The WATT/Puppy is the best PA system in the world, goes the thinking.

It's not hard to see how this can come about;

the system can play full-range, full-dynamic music at high volumes. Also, in fairness, WATT/Puppy systems of a decade or so ago did make a sound that was forward and hard to handle without the very, very best in source and amplification. But those days are long past. In fact, the forward nature of Wilson speakers of old is almost entirely gone (or rather, it disappears fast with warm-up and run-in... ►

► if you listen to the speakers right out the box, they sound forward and bright, but settle down spatially and tonally over time) and a very different presentation is now to the fore. This sound projects somewhat into the room, but gives a sublime depth to the sound and musical instruments within that soundstage sound as if they are entirely natural and in the room with you.

Of course, this does depend on the quality of the disc, and the Wilson design is unforgiving of heavy-handed edits. You find yourself drawn to carefully engineered recordings from the 1970s and before, because they are so sublime. It doesn't make modern recordings unplayable, but just digs out more from Stevie Wonder's *Inner-visions* in so musical a manner, you end up listening to the whole album, and a darkening winter's afternoon in England gets transformed to a balmy summer's evening in America. If more people mastered on these

speakers, there would be infinitely better recordings, because you couldn't drop in edit points without their becoming all the more noticeable. Of course, the really subtle edit points still go almost unnoticed, unless you are being hypercritical of positioning within the soundstage – occasionally, it seems as if a singer has taken one step forward for a bar or two before returning to his or her normal position. But, that's not simply an arbiter of good recording technique, but an indicator of just how accurate these Wilsons really are.



That accuracy poses a problem for a reviewer. Usually a speaker can be pinned down as bright or dark or woody or clean and so on. The Wilson is more of a chimera than that.

You play lots of woodwinds, the speaker sounds 'woody'. Play some moody Beethoven string quartets and the sound goes all 'dark' and 'moody'. Play some cool and clean Count Basie and... well, you get the picture. Every speaker has a character, but this one is more fleeting, more hidden than most. And perhaps it's that which sets this speaker apart from all the WATT/Puppy systems that went before.

This presages coherence across the Wilson range that wasn't so noticeable before, because this un-sound is something common to Wilson speakers today. The WATT/Puppy – perhaps by virtue of being the senior speaker in the range – sounded different to other Wilson speakers in the range. Now, if someone likes the MAXX 2, but cannot fit so large a speaker in the room, or wants something bigger than the Sophia 2 or Duette, the System 8 fits like a glove.

Usually, a speaker system that's old enough to vote, especially one that has gone through so many changes, could be accused of beginning to tire.

Some of those changes have to be anti-aging treatments, and eventually you can only go so far. Wilson's

WATT/Puppy System 8 is

the happy exception; it's a design that keeps drawing on developments in design from above (and now below) and just keeps on getting better. From the outside, the changes are subtle, almost invisible, but under the skin, major surgery has taken place and the results aren't just renewed vigour.

I expected the audio equivalent of a hip replacement, what I got was the bionic man!



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two box, three-way loudspeaker system
Driver Complement:	2x 200mm bass units 1x 175mm midrange 1x 25mm inverted titanium dome
Nominal Impedance:	4 Ohms
Sensitivity:	92dB
Bandwidth:	21Hz-22.5kHz -3dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	330 x 1040 x 480mm
Weight (per speaker):	77.1kg
Price:	£24,950

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Manufacturer:

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